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# SGF

STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

## Who Owns the City? China Miéville's *The City and the City* as an Urban Gothic Dystopia

by Ljubica Matek

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## Who Owns the City? China Miéville's *The City and the City* as an Urban Gothic Dystopia

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### ABSTRACT

This article considers China Miéville's novel, *The City and the City*, from the point of view of geography of space, suggesting that capital is the dominating force that shapes urban reality. The novel both builds on the traditional Victorian Gothic ideas of the city as a place of dual existence and exploits the topoi of detective fiction, but instead of focusing on the individual and the issues of psychological doubling and existential plights of a detective, it is more concerned with the modes of production and the way that capitalism continuously re-invents itself by its use of space without making itself known. The plot elements and aesthetics of detective fiction add to the mystery of murder, of the twin cities' identity, and highlight the false consciousness of the masses, which enables the ideology's effectiveness.

### KEYWORDS:

City; urban Gothic; space; capitalism; China Miéville

Among the various issues with which twenty-first-century Gothic deals, the city and the urban tend to take a prominent role. While medieval motifs remain a major creative source for much of contemporary Gothic,<sup>1</sup> a turn toward urban spaces and contemporary themes, inaugurated by Victorian Gothic, still affect the genre today. Moving away from the distant medieval past and isolated castles, *fin de siècle* both Gothic and fantastic literature set their stories in the urban present and discuss contemporary issues (Dryden 19). In fact, the literary move from the rural to the urban setting reflects the actual process of urbanization, resulting in depictions of the city as a place of desperation, vice, illness, and death (Matek 154-65). In addition to this, Victorian Gothic delves into the anxieties resulting from living in a modern metropolis, predominantly those that, as Alexandra Warwick suggests, have to do with "the existence of the self in the modern urban landscape and the relation of the self to the others who inhabit it" (36). The preoccupation with these issues results in an awareness of the fact that people can easily hide or get lost in a large city because the multitude of the city dwellers seem to largely be unconcerned about the others' lives and destinies. In addition, "[i]ssues of duality – split personalities, physical transformations, mistaken identities, doppelgängers – were found to be manifested in the

social, geographical and architectural schisms of the modern city" (Dryden 19), as proposed in various *fin de siècle* texts, but perhaps most famously in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). The sublimity and uncanniness emerging out of a sense of isolation in a crowd and the impossibility of fixing one's own or the other's identity have colored the atmosphere of Victorian Gothic and, subsequently, also of the urban fantastic and the contemporary urban Gothic, as they contributed significantly to their development due to their recurrent uses of the dark, gloomy city as the setting.

The Victorian idea of the city as an alienating and dangerous place that fosters lies and deceit is a recurrent one and includes visions of the city as the one represented in James Thomson's 1874 long poem *The City of Dreadful Night*: "The City is of Night; perchance of Death / But certainly of Night" (lines 1-2). Without referring to them explicitly, Thomson's poem illustrates the concepts of the Gothic and the uncanny as related to the city and as they are understood for the purpose of this article. According to David Punter and Glennis Byron, Victorian Gothic domesticates Gothic figures, spaces, and themes so as to locate its horrors within the world of the contemporary reader. This results in the appearance of criminals, madmen, and scientists as protagonists and the transformation of the setting into the contemporary bourgeois domestic world and the new urban landscape (Punter and Byron 26). More than a century later, the contemporary reader's setting is still predominantly urban, which is why Miéville's urban

<sup>1</sup> As well as fantasy; see, for example, George R. R. Martin's epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

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Gothic dystopia borrows much from its Victorian predecessors. Moreover, the contemporary urban Gothic explores issues that were also central to Victorian Gothic, which displayed “a particular interest in questions of identity and the transgression of borders” (26).

In line with the ideas of multiple and uncertain identities and transgression is the concept of the uncanny, which is seen here as describing the notion of something familiar that under specific circumstances becomes frightening (Freud 220). Freud develops the concept originally introduced by Ernst Jentsch to mean that one “is not quite ‘at home’ or ‘at ease’ in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him. In brief, the word suggests that a *lack of orientation* is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident” (Jentsch 8). Such “intellectual uncertainty” is a result of great sensitivity, and not everyone can sense the uncanny quality of a person or a situation, implying that it takes someone sensitive, observant, and intelligent (a “detective”) to recognize the essence of what is uncanny and solve the mystery presented in the narrative (Freud 220; Jentsch 8).

With this in mind, the paper focuses on China Miéville’s novel, *The City and the City* (2009), and reads it as an urban Gothic dystopia, representing the city as a site of production, distribution, and use of goods, as well as income and wealth. In the novel, Inspector Tyador Borlú leads the investigation of the murder of a student, Mahalia Geary. What may seem like a straightforward detective story is complicated by the fact that the murder victim lived in the city of Ul Qoma, whereas her body is found in its “twin” city of Beszel – a city that shares the territory with Ul Qoma – and yet both of them have separate languages, governments, customs, and traditions. The citizens of the respective cities are not allowed to look at people or buildings in the other city, let alone cross borders between them. Miéville’s unusual conceptual premise of overlapping yet separate cities, in which people are taught to reject most of what they can see with their own eyes, is additionally complicated by the fact that Ul Qoma experiences economic rise, whereas Beszel suffers recession; in this analysis, the cities’ economic inequity is seen as crucial. The rise of the city (that is, urbanization) is inextricably linked with industrialization and, subsequently, with capital and its accumulation. As the headquarters for many factories, companies, and banks, the city’s identity is largely economic in nature, but its nature is also exploitative, excluding, and dangerous. The city’s literal and symbolic dual identity is both intriguing and menacing as it is revealed that its entire existence relies on falsehood and is designed to enable the circulation and accumulation of capital. The citizens and their lives turn out to be unimportant, a mere backdrop for the actual driving force that is

capital, which is only interested in its own multiplication.

### THE CITY, THE DETECTIVE, AND NOIR

Although only aesthetically, as suggested by Andrew McKie, Miéville’s novel echoes Borges, Robbe-Grillet, and Kafka, to whom it owes the nightmarish and somewhat labyrinthine world in which the search for the murderer takes place, it seems that the novel is equally closely linked to detective fiction from which it borrows various aesthetic and formal topoi and shapes them anew. In fact, like the urban Gothic, the detective story also has its roots in the Victorian era, although it should not be forgotten that even certain early Gothic novels, such as Ann Radcliffe’s, presented their mysterious tales “in the guise of a criminal narrative” (Worthington 32). The parallels between (Victorian/urban) Gothic and detective fiction are not strained, but rather quite natural as both genres deal with death, murder, instincts, and desires; their narratives work toward some kind of resolution or understanding of the crime/mystery, and both employ an urban setting. According to Mary Evans, “[t]he city is therefore always a place in which we have to discover, detect and hopefully ‘un-mask’ the people with whom we come into contact. Ordinary, day-to-day life becomes a matter of detection” (42). In other words, life is the process of acquiring knowledge about the city – a place that is at the same time familiar and unfamiliar. As argued by both Jentsch and Freud, it takes a special individual to sense the uncanny (the unfamiliar in the familiar) and thus to discover (any given) truth, which explains why British detective, spy, and crime fiction features an amateur detective who is very often more effective in detection than professional policemen and why urban Gothic often takes the form of a hybrid Gothic-detective narrative. In line with this, the intelligent detective protagonists are usually wholly unconventional in their personal lives<sup>2</sup>, often struggling with mistakes, and possibly even crimes, that constitute their troubled or dark past (Evans 47).

However, detecting and “knowing” are not only related to identity and the identification of a criminal, but also to wealth and capital. According to Evans, early crime-writing of the 1840s shows that the urban world acquired its own morality, and that crime and its literary representations are inextricably linked to both the city and capital as “later writers, and certainly from

2 For example, Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, the prototype for all future quirky, dark, and exceptionally intelligent detectives, such as John Le Carré’s Harry Palmer, and Colin Dexter’s Inspector Morse, to name a few. The trope has taken over other media and national literatures, too (e.g. Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, the detective protagonist in Chandler’s novels and subsequent film noir adaptations, Jo Nesbø’s Harry Hole, or even Dr. Gregory House of *House, M.D.*, an American TV series).

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Sherlock Holmes onwards, grasped the essential point that major crimes such as murder for material gain are more likely to occur among those who have been blessed with wealth" (5). The detective himself is not untouched by the influence of capital, since a modern detective should be "an independent young gentleman of independent income, which ensures impartiality and the leisure to pursue investigations" (Frisby 57). While this may have worked for the likes of Holmes and Poirot, the contemporary detective's relationship with capital is much more complex as he struggles with both money and relationships. This is why Miéville's protagonist seems to resemble the disheveled Philip Marlowe more than the gentleman-detective epitomized in the characters of Holmes and Poirot, whose appearance, education, and speech only emphasize their upper-class origins. And while the influence of the early British detective fiction tropes is clear, the contemporary reader (who is also likely a viewer of films) will sooner recognize the novel's similarity to the more contemporary offspring of early detective fiction – film noir.

Apart from the characteristic visual atmosphere of film noir and its various psychological, political, and existential plots, film noir and the Gothic in its urban variety share an important quality: the ability to be popular and politically subversive at the same time (Spicer xlvii). Andrew Spicer suggests that it is not easy to define film noir because it is a retrospective phenomenon that evolves over time, preventing one from compiling a list of conclusive criteria (xxxvii, xl). Nevertheless, the dark, brooding city as the setting seems to be a constant:

Most noirs take place in dark, nighttime cities, their streets damp with rain that reflects the flashing neon signs where the alienated, often psychologically disturbed, male antihero encounters a deceitful femme fatale leading to his doom. [...] its characteristically dark, malign, morally ambivalent, and unstable universe, where existence is understood to be meaningless and absurd. (Spicer xl)

In line with this, *The City and the City* features a typical detective protagonist, Inspector Tyador Borlú – an experienced senior detective unburdened by family responsibilities and loosely involved with two different women – who takes over a case that will change his life forever.

The novel opens with Borlú investigating a murder scene, and the victim represents an atypical *femme fatale*, as she complicates the plot by the schemes she was involved in prior to her murder and which Borlú needs to clarify in order to solve the crime. Love or sexual relationships are thus eliminated from the narrative as the focus lies elsewhere – namely, in the economic circumstances that inform the life in Beszel and Ul Qoma, the two cities

referred to in the novel's title, and that, conveniently, make up one of the interpretative layers of noir. In fact, Spicer also highlights the connection between the genre and relevant economic circumstances in a particular context by suggesting that film noir is "popular cinema elevated to art but also [...] popular art that was oppositional, exploring the dark underside of the American dream" (xlix), much like the Gothic explores the underside of humanity by means of various transgressions and its distinctly dark settings. The "dark" setting of the novel refers to its almost imperceptible underlying driving force, that is "[c]apitalism as a mode of production, a totality which has never been systemised or achieved, is never 'over and done with', and is still being realized" (Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism* 7). In fact, the mythology of the American Dream and the idea that success and wealth are available to anyone who works hard enough for what they want is underlying to global capitalism. The ideology behind it, however, erases the obstacles that are on the way and that prevent vast groups of people from ever succeeding since the mechanism of capitalist economy is designed in order to help the rich get richer. With capitalism gone global, it is no wonder that the noir transcends its original geographical and national borders and becomes a worldwide, "continuously evolving cultural phenomenon" not only as a means of aesthetic representation, but also as a political "vehicle through which that mythology can be critiqued and challenged" (Spicer xlix). Similarly to the Gothic, the noir questions the issues of power and its spatial and monetary distribution, which makes the two far more compatible than would seem at first. Such a potent combination of the architectural, psychological, economic, and political available in both (urban) Gothic and detective narratives, particularly the noir, can easily explain why writers (and other artists) are drawn to explore and represent the city as a *noir* locus of fantastic occurrences.

### THE DUAL NATURE OF THE CITY

In an interview, Miéville contends that the old form of the urban uncanny – for example, the back streets and forgotten shops – is being replaced by new uncanny or forgotten places such as: "the kind of large warehouses that have been built in the late Eighties at the edge of an industrial estate next to a McDonalds [sic]" (Schmeink 28). Likewise, the locality of his novel is a mixture of the old and the new: an archeological site in an eastern European twin city, its intertwined city streets, and the building of a large corporation. Thus, *The City and the City* seems to successfully incorporate both the early notions of the fantastic double, and the ideas of the city as (inevitably) a place of political and economic existence by depicting a radically totalitarian urban setting created and supported by a multinational corporation. The space of

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the two cities (which, in fact, are one) is thus turned into a zone of conflict between two different cultures and nations competing for resources and economic success. The depiction of their uncanny similarity and the invisible borders between them symbolize the gap between classes. In fact, rather than speaking of a lack of resources, whatever they may be – natural, financial, and so on, that creates a radical split between the two cities – it becomes clear that the novel speaks of the issue of access and restrictions of access to the resources that are a consequence of uneven distribution of (political, financial) power. Hence, the doubling between the two cities that is highlighted as “real” emulates the relationship between those who have power and those who do not. The power, Miéville’s novel suggests, lies in the hands of those who create and benefit from the global economy – multinational corporations that have the power and means to extend or deny the right to the use of particular (geographic, financial, human) resources – rather than in the hands of politicians or the people themselves, as would be expected in an alleged democracy.

With this, Miéville adds a new dimension to the stories of doubles. Typically, the stories of doubles are concerned with the psychological implications of doubling, such as duality of human nature, the tension between instincts and reason, and even the pathology of a split personality. Consequently, the protagonists of *fin de siècle* urban fantastic texts, such as Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and even certain late twentieth century films such as David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*, are seen to undergo a psychological crisis effected by the appearance of their doubles. They try, with more or less success, to understand how the doubling occurred and what it means for them as individuals (Matek 161-174). In other words, the central issue is one of identity. In Miéville’s novel, however, the central dialectics is not between an individual and its double, but there is a tension between two whole groups of people (two cities, two nations), which requires the reader to go beyond the issues of individual identity in order to make meaning of Miéville’s complex novel. In fact, what seems to be a conflict between a city and its hateful but inevitable counterpart, turns out to be the conflict at the level of land-labour-capital relation, that is “the constitutive trinity of capitalist society” (Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism* 8). The cities exist within one another. Their streets and avenues are situated on the same ground and often intertwined, “crosshatched,” making it necessary for their inhabitants to be taught from early on how to purposefully ignore, or “unsee” what in reality is there but should not be seen. The citizens are carefully trained and thoroughly indoctrinated so that they comply with not being able to trust their own senses and cognitive faculties. In turn, they accept the schizophrenic (and completely arbitrary) scenario according to which Beszel and

Ul Qoma are indeed two separate cities (city-states, to be exact), even though they are situated on the same ground and share the same city map: “On a wall a largescale map of Beszel and Ul Qoma. To avoid prosecution, the lines and shades of division were there – total, alter, and crosshatched – but ostentatiously subtle, distinctions of greyscale” (Miéville 46).

In effect, each of the cities is presented to their citizens as each other’s heterotopia – Beszel and Ul Qoma interrupt each other’s continuity; they are a city within a city, mirroring each other, but their most profound difference is in their current economic situation and the ability to adapt to market changes. More specifically, the tension between the two cities is largely produced by the fact that they are in “economic antiphase. As the river industry of Beszel had slowed, Ul Qoma’s business picked up” (44), and it is not only a matter of degree, but also of type: while Beszel saw its golden age in industry, Ul Qoma’s income largely comes from finance. So, even if one takes it that these two cities are separate topological urban entities, they seem to represent the historical change from modernity to postmodernity, from industrial to postindustrial economy. In that sense, they are still heavily dependent on one another as the financially well-off make their living by exploiting those who are not and who are dependent on the “help” given in form of loans, exploitative jobs, and so on. According to Lefebvre, this mode of production is highly incoherent as it reproduces itself in the form of distinct parts that still create an ensemble, the existence of a sub-system that makes up a disorganized whole containing levels that are both disjoined and conjoined (*The Survival of Capitalism* 10). In other words, these two cities (classes, groups) cannot function without one another, even though it seems that they are separate and that one is superior to the other.

### BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: URBAN GOTHIC AND DYSTOPIA

The economic heterogeneity of the urban setting can also be attributed to human migrations that contribute to the globalized and multi-ethnic image of the city. The hybrid existence of migrants who live neither here nor there is highlighted by the invisible boundary between the two cities: one is simultaneously here and there but is only allowed to acknowledge the ontology of the one, while completely ignoring the other. This provides the narrative with the traits of danger, murder, and mystery that are equally shared by detective and Gothic stories; the encounter or any kind of unauthorized interaction with the monstrous Other results in a symbolic death as the transgressor is taken away by Breach, the secret police, never to be seen again. Thus, although the Other is constructed in economic and ethnic terms, rather than in the form of an actual monster (a vampire, a zombie), the dangers of

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transgression remain the same as in other Gothic narratives. Conveniently and very significantly, Miéville sets the plot of the novel in a fictional area somewhere on the European Southeast (the Balkans), referencing actual locations, such as Budapest, Varna, and Bucharest. He situates the fictional Beszel and Ul Qoma somewhere on the border between the historical Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, at a geographical locality marked to this day by migrations and transitions, as well as by its perceived identity of a borderline space, an invisible border between the East and West. The nod to Stoker's *Dracula* is more than obvious as the cultural, scientific, social, and political tensions between the colonial West and the colonized East represent the very basis of Stoker's vampire narrative.

The hybrid nature of the region that Miéville represents as a place of both actual and fictional cultural, geopolitical, and economic transition is additionally highlighted by the very distinctive names of the two fictional urban entities that, contrary to the laws of physics, occupy the same geographic space. On the one hand, there is Beszel, a modernist industrial city on the decline whose name could have been derived from the Hungarian verb "to speak" – "beszél," and which may very well be a metaphor for the old Europe. The Arabic-sounding name of Ul Qoma, on the other hand, suggests its implied connection to the East, which is further emphasized by the fact that its economy is on the rise thanks to its strong finance industry, reminding us of cities such as the present day Dubai, a corporate Mecca and a symbol of globalization. Additionally highlighting the economic underpinnings of the novel is the economic significance of the setting. Namely, Beszel and Ul Qoma are situated in the midst of what the readers recognize as the territory of ex-communist countries, all of which have in the meantime, more or less successfully, transitioned to a market economy and joined the EU. The process of transition, much like the one implied in the novel, included models of privatization which in turn implied extreme influx of foreign capital and the creation of various areas of influence in education and economy, as was the case in Beszel and Ul Qoma which, although theoretically independent, function as American or Canadian colonies: "Ul Qoma, in its university district, where Prince of Wales and other Canadian institutions gleefully exploited the fact that the US state (for reasons now embarrassing even to most of its rightwingers) boycotted Ul Qoma" (Miéville 91). Ironically, the two cities, so determined to preserve their national identity and distinction from their immediate neighbors, depend in fact on foreign money and political influence, and the resemblance to the real life situation in the countries of the said territory is uncanny.

In addition to noting Miéville's reference to the totalitarian history of the countries in the region and its nod to *Dracula*, it

is difficult not to notice an additional reference to Anthony Burgess, whose dystopian masterpiece, *A Clockwork Orange*, features the invented nadsat language similar to Miéville's Besz and Illitan. A combination of Russian and Cockney English, nadsat alludes to the fact that the fictional Britain of Burgess's novel is not much different from the then totalitarian Russia. Moreover, nadsat is implemented as a specific literary device intended to provoke the reader's sense of alienation from the narrative world and the protagonist, due to which the reader does not judge the characters but rather observes and learns from and about them, gradually building a rapport with Alex as one learns his language and becomes immersed in his world. Yet, rather than aiming at identification with his protagonists, Miéville seems to point out that linguistic and cultural differences can be overemphasized and abused for the purpose of manipulation and control by deterring the attention from the issues of power and distribution of wealth to highly flammable issues of national identity:

[I]n its original or later written form, Illitan bears no resemblance to Besz. Nor does it sound similar. But these distinctions are not as deep as they appear. Despite careful cultural differentiation, in the shape of their grammars and the relations of their phonemes (if not the base sounds themselves), the languages are closely related – they share a common ancestor, after all. (Miéville 4)

The characters themselves, at least those who participate in the subversive and forbidden investigation spread across both cities, acknowledge that the distinctions between the two languages are overemphasized: "I started the last sentence in Illitan, the language of Ul Qoma. 'This is fine.' He interrupted in his old-fashioned Illitan-inflected Besz. 'It's the same damn-faced language anyway'" (34). Moreover, Besz uses a script that resembles Cyrillic, whereas Illitan uses the Roman script (41).

The implied reference to ex-Yugoslavian languages that are different but similar, and definitely mutually intelligible, is hard to miss, as is the described mutual history of the two fictional cities, which seems to echo the complex history of Yugoslavia prior to its end in the early 1990s: "It may or may not have been Beszel, that we built, back then, while others may have been building Ul Qoma on the same bones. Perhaps there was one thing back then that later schismed on the ruins, or perhaps our ancestral Beszel had not yet met and standoffishly entwined with its neighbor" (51). In addition, one of the key consequences of Yugoslavia's disintegration was unlawful mass-scale privatization of the country's assets, which resulted in the majority of the country being impoverished, and a small percentage of the "chosen" ones (in each of the emerging independent countries) getting massively

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rich. The novel does not shy away from using actual historical references that situate the fictional cities into the world of countries such as Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, and China, all marked by distinct totalitarian regimes, and most of them also by the transition to some form of market economy and capitalism: “Many older establishments and offices still displayed portraits of Ya Ilsa, often above ‘Ilsa’s Brothers’ Atatürk and Tito. The cliché was that in older offices there was always a faded patch between those two, where erstwhile brother Mao had once beamed” (161). The total influence of capital is further underlined with the use of the Ul Qoman neologism *glasnostroika*, which designates “an end to restrictive thinking” (161), and represents a reference to the famous Soviet *perestroika*, which entailed the reform of the economic system in line with the (world’s) markets as opposed to the government’s central planning.

Thus, two such heterogeneous and yet similar cities, or the double identity of what in reality is one urban entity, reflect the nature of capital, the city’s underlying schizophrenic current, which is, according to Deleuze and Guattari, a “motley painting of everything that ever was believed” and “a strange hybrid of the ultra-modern and the archaic” (Deleuze and Guattari 34, Fisher 6). In fact, the (idea of the) monstrous Other is created by the capital in order to more easily exploit the resources of both cities for their own benefit. The irony lies in the fact that the monstrous entity seems to be capital itself, which (literally – through wars and other violent conflicts) murders and consumes people to ensure its survival.

Consequently, the blend of the hallucinatory, the noir, the strange, invented language, and the references to the ex-communist areas of Central and Eastern Europe results in a disturbing dystopia that takes place in a totalitarian-like society overseen constantly by Breach, a mysterious authority with limitless power. The name alludes to the worst possible offence: namely, the breaching of the invisible barrier between the two cities, which can include a mere conscious glance at a person, building, or vehicle in the opposite city and their purposefully highlighted differences. Breach creates and fosters the epistemological and ontological uncertainty about the nature of the two cities that could easily be resolved by means of critical thinking, but which would then compromise the economic exploitation that is at hand. Because of that, their numerous similarities are constructed into a taboo: breach, the mistake of seeing the other or confusing it with the self, as it is of crucial importance to divide the citizens of the two cities and keep them focused on their cultural differences and staged tensions. Thus, by highlighting the difference of the Other, the novel actually reiterates the fact that “the absolutely other is inextricably within” and that breach “was statement of both crime

and identity” (Dollimore 182, Miéville 237).

### DOCILE BODIES AND THE CAPITALIST SOCIETY

To ensure that the carefully crafted distinction and separation between the two cities is upheld, the system resorts to a highly ideological education, or rather indoctrination, which disciplines people into perpetuating the state of affairs and, in Foucauldian terms, turns them into docile bodies (135-141). According to Foucault, to discipline a body in order to subject it to one’s will (ideology, purpose) and use, transform, or improve it accordingly, the body must undergo “uninterrupted, constant coercion” to follow the required protocols or otherwise suffer the consequences of disobedience (137). This is exactly the case with the citizens of the two cities: “The early years of a Besz (and presumably an Ul Qoman) child are intense learnings of cues. We pick up styles of clothing, permissible colors, ways of walking and holding oneself, very fast” (Miéville 65). Because of their docility, they are complicit in the construction of national identity, and they perpetuate both the system of total control and the myth of the radical “Otherness” of the other city. Ironically, the differences in architecture, vehicles, and clothing are so subtle that at one point during his investigation Borlú himself “realised he [I] did not know what city we were in” (Miéville 250). Deconstructing thus the idea of natural or naturally perceivable cultural or national borders, it becomes clear that territoriality is an arbitrary socio-political construct and that borders are perceived and accepted only thanks to meticulous indoctrination.

The extent of the regime’s control is further highlighted by the fact that, apart from the citizens of Beszel and Ul Qoma who are taught from early on how to view the world and what to see as their own, the incoming tourists must also pass an intense crash course in learning how to distinguish between the two cities. Without such precaution, tourists would naturally perceive the two cities as one, which would subsequently erode the myth of distinction. To that end, they cannot obtain a visa for either Beszel or Ul Qoma without passing the course. The boundaries and rules are learned, and strictly observed so that a person may only see what he or she is allowed to see, and, shockingly, both the tourists and the locals accept the imposed mode of behavior and thinking. In this way, Miéville constructs a dystopian setting in which a person literally decides not to trust one’s own senses but accepts to perceive reality as it is represented by the ruling authorities of both cities. Their shocking docility reveals the absurdity behind the constructs, such as borders, nations, and taboos that are meant to be broken (Schmeink 29). For example, the representation of a double-café, which foils the nature of the two cities’ division, reveals that the distinction is purely imaginary



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and ideological:

[T]he DöplirCaffé, one Muslim and one Jewish coffeehouse, rented side by side, each with its own counter and kitchen, halal and kosher, sharing a single name, sign, and sprawl of tables, the dividing wall removed. Mixed groups would come, greet the two proprietors, sit together, separating on communitarian lines only long enough to order their permitted food from the relevant side, or ostentatiously from either and both in the case of freethinkers. (Miéville 22)

The training of citizens to un-see and not to believe their own cognitive faculties, but rather to become uncritical in their compliance to the authority is crucial in order to manipulate them easily. Consequently, the ultimate crime is to “breach,” that is, to acknowledge the actual unity of the two cities and thus expose the controlling nature of the regime.

Nevertheless, the nature of the two regimes and, quite possibly, the reason behind the schism within the single geographical locality divided into two political units, is slowly revealed through subtle clues, all of which relate to the economic status and standard of the two cities and their citizens, and their mutual dependence on foreign capital and investments. Interestingly, both regimes use nationalist rhetoric to hide the truth about the actual state of affairs. The constant references to political extremists, nationalists and unificationists in particular, whose activities are consistently used as a diversion by multinational corporations so as to keep everyone’s focus on the flammable issues of nationality and cultural identity, have people disregard the issues related to the cities’ economic success and the questions of the distribution of the surplus value. In short, “[unificationists] had, mostly cack-handedly, targeted nationalist intellectuals – bricks through windows and shit through doors. They had been accused of furtively propagandising among refugees and new immigrants with limited expertise at seeing and unseeing” and used their agendas to try to “weaponise such urban uncertainty” in which there are “different visions of what the united city would be like, what would be its language, what would be its name” (Miéville 43). Such diversions clearly represent an instance of Marxian false consciousness about the mechanisms of capitalist oppression and exploitation of the masses, of the desiring machines that submit themselves voluntarily to repression, as well as human inability to see how circumstances shape them (Deleuze and Guattari 3).

Although the plight of the individual is not the novel’s central focus, the images of next-door neighbors unseeing each other remind the reader of the isolation of the contemporary individual who is no longer dependent on other people for help or

entertainment, but rather seeks to satisfy their needs by consuming goods and services catered to them, reinforcing the capitalist reality of lack of belief that results in people becoming consumer-spectators (Fisher 4). In *Beszel* and *Ul Qoma*, the alienation is additionally exacerbated by the awareness that the neighbor might be living in the other city and even a glance at them causes the risk of being accused of breach:

It was, not surprisingly that day perhaps, hard to observe borders, to see and unsee only what I should, on my way home. I was hemmed in by people not in my city, walking slowly through areas crowded but not crowded in *Beszel*. I focused on the stones really around me – cathedrals, bars, the brick flourishes of what had been a school – that I had grown up with. I ignored the rest or tried. (Miéville 36)

To highlight the connection between the urban setting and the political economy on a larger scale, Miéville asserts in an interview that “surroundings intrude on our lives,” and for most people in the West that means urban environment, that is the city with its “official” and the hidden “unofficial” side (Schmeink 26). For Miéville, the unofficial side is closely connected with the issues of current political economy reflected in the fact that increasingly larger portions of cities are being owned by private companies who are surreptitiously transforming public into private spaces:

This is obviously associated with the near liberalization of the city. These zones are privatized space, but they are privatized space that pretends to be public space. Many of these zones are owned by companies. They look like streets, well they look like fucking ugly streets, but they pretend to be streets. But actually, they are private thoroughfares. And that is when we had the Occupy London situation and so on. The notion of what it is to be a citizen in a city is changing because these privatized spaces are not merely very ugly; they are not merely an attempt to bureaucratize that which cannot and should not be bureaucratized; they are also privatized, they are commodities. (Schmeink 27-28)

The ownership of public space turns out to be crucial for the resolution of the murder mystery, as from the very onset Inspector Borlú understands that the murder of the twenty-four year old American student Mahalia Geary, which takes place before the novel begins and which instigates the story, is somehow connected with the nature of the two cities and the possibility that the invisible boundaries between the two have somehow been crossed

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illegally: “You know that area: is there any chance we’re looking at breach? There were seconds of silence” (Miéville 14). The mention of breach makes everyone uncomfortable and it soon becomes clear that it is a crime far worse than murder. To breach was to cross the boundary between what was available to the public, what they were allowed to see and to perform, and what was forbidden, what they have been “relentlessly trained” to “unsee” (70).

The efforts the people of Beszel and Ul Qoma put into conscious “unseeing” of the other, that is their immediate neighbors, turns them into beings who no longer trust their senses (or their common sense), making them unsee how the corporations control their lives and participate in the sellout of their national treasures (symbolized by the corporate smuggling of precious archaeological artefacts) and the corruption in politics and academia. Moreover, the staged unificationist rebellion, “a decoy” did not move people to action, but rather only reaffirmed their readiness to be deceived, their complicity in conscious unseeing: “a little revolution that had died before it was born, and had not known it” (277, 278). In fact, Borlú defines the surreal moment as “outright foregone conclusion” (280), as the citizens of both city-states refuse to acknowledge the fact that they, in actuality, live in a single city, and choose to cling to their respective constructed national identities – a comforting lie, and a pacifying idea of home. This is a manifestation of what Deleuze and Guattari would see as “herd instinct...the desire to be led, the desire to have someone else legislate life” (Seem xvi). The ideology thus promoted reveals itself as highly effective since it becomes indistinguishable from practice. As such, it is not expressed at an ideological level and does not appear as ideology, although ideology it is, the ideology of capitalism that makes us want to “unsee” the social interactions of power (Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism* 12). According to Fisher, “[t]he attitude of ironic distance proper to postmodern capitalism is supposed to immunize us against the seductions of fanaticism. Lowering our expectations, we are told, is a small price to pay for being protected from terror and totalitarianism” (5). In turn, by believing that they are protected from political totalitarianism, the people of Beszel and Ul Qoma accept economic totalitarianism of the corporation. Borlú, having realized the mechanisms behind the ideology, can no longer return to his usual life in Beszel and is forced to literally and symbolically leave his life and home behind by becoming a part of Breach, the secret group who inhabit Beszel and Ul Qoma as a single city and who, rather than being seen by all, are seen by none, reinforcing the idea that people – as a mass – cannot escape the Marxian false consciousness. Knowledge is reserved for the chosen – exiled – few. The Breach, and Borlú with them, live in the interstices of ideology, not belonging to either nationalism or capitalism that renders them literally and symbol-

ically invisible, just like the knowledge they possess.

Such lack of epistemological certainty opens up the space for various conspiracy theories, which have one purpose only: to deter from the actual truth, the truth being the path of the money. In Miéville’s novel, the conspiracy is twofold: first, that Beszel and Ul Qoma are two cities, and second that there is a third city called Orciny, situated between the two cities and functioning as the true authority governing the existence of both Beszel and Ul Qoma. Although the theory of Orciny is preposterous, it serves the purpose of a corrupted politician, Mikhel Buric, a Social Democrat working in the Chamber of Commerce. Buric abuses his knowledge of the theory as well as his awareness of Mahaila Geary’s interests and the general predilection for paranoia, and persuades her to figure as a mule in the process of smuggling valuable archaeological artefacts from Ul Qoma into Beszel for the benefit of a foreign corporation, as well as Buric’s own financial profit: “‘It was all geared stuff that got stolen,’ I said. ‘Sear and Core are investigating the artefacts. This is a science experiment’” (Miéville 283). Buric, as the corporate pawn, dies in the final showdown, whereas the regional head of CorIntech leaves Beszel unscathed, making it clear that the destiny of two “odd little cities” (286) dependent on foreign money does not concern anyone, or rather that one of the central issues of contemporary urban Gothic must be the political-economic struggle, which to a large extent is still taboo. The capital and the issue of money and class is a repressed force that governs our lives just like sexuality and race, or even more so.

To illustrate this, in his interview with Schmeink, Miéville is explicit about the fact that “you can’t talk about the future of the city without talking about the future of the political economy of the city and the future of the political system” (31), which for now implies that life in the city is modified according to individual or corporate desires for profit, and that such individual desires (or desires of the chosen few) will produce decisions that will ultimately affect everyone’s lives, as they did in Beszel and Ul Qoma. In Miéville’s fictional city/cities, movement and thought are strictly controlled by Breach limiting the personal freedoms of its citizens. If the “future of the city” as envisaged in this urban Gothic dystopia is extrapolated in the real world, we will start seeing more “privatized zones” where “ordinary citizens [of London] might not be allowed in it, unless they show their ID. Or unless they can prove they have a certain amount of money or something like that. [...] The future [of London as an example] is being dictated by an ongoing battle between grassroots localism and corporate gigantism” (Schmeink 31). Clearly, as David Harvey (1978) and later Edward Soja (1990) have contended, the urban environment of the city is rooted in the ever-changing landscape of capital that continuously builds a particular landscape suited to it

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at a particular historical point and subsequently destroys it in moments of crises. Capital is thus figured as the force that shapes the urban space which contemporary Gothic must take into account. The treatment of urban space in *The City and the City* – as simultaneously physical and metaphysical – makes it clear that “space can be made to hide consequences from us” (Soja 6), which makes it an instrument of political economy.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Miéville's urban Gothic dystopia continues the tradition of both Victorian Gothic and detective story in that it is very much concerned with the complexities and mysteries of urban life. In *The City and the City*, Miéville's concerns lie specifically in political economy and the ways in which the urban Gothic imagines the future of the city within current modes of production. From the point of view of human geography and its interest in how the interaction between the space and human activity shapes the human environment, the novel shows that urban Gothic is a very political genre, which is additionally made clear by its dystopian view of human existence as totally controlled by the invisible power of capital. The city space is a social space and as such it can be used “as a tool for the analysis of society” (Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 34). The uncanny phenomenon of doubling or dual existence is connected both to the urban life and to the schizophrenia of capitalist reality that implies the accumulation of energy and its unlimited possibilities on the one hand and the power of repression that produces docile bodies on the other. In addition, it implies that the city has an underground, repressed, and unconscious life resulting from fake consciousness and the acceptance of repression (Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 36). The urban space is here represented as being both a means of production and a means of control since it is steeped in capital and its circulation because of which it can hardly be fully controlled either by the well-known authority of Breach or by those who inhabit the two cities. Rather, it seems that urban life is controlled by the ideology of the corporation, as the owner of capital, which surreptitiously and invisibly shapes the urban space and the lives of people inhabiting it.

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